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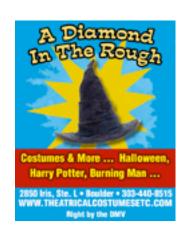
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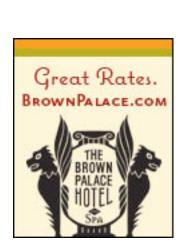


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Now you don't

The failure of character in an artistic democracy by Dale Bridges

Eli Gottlieb does not look like me.

That statement might come across as overtly narcissistic to you (because it is), but I am sort of shocked by this fact. I thought, at the very least, we would share a few physical characteristics: hair color, bone structure, nostril alignment — that sort of thing. Nope. Nothing. Actually, he looks remarkably like Gary Sinise, the intense actor/director who is (unfortunately) best known for his role as the patriotic masochist, Lieutenant Dan, in Forrest Gump. There is an intensity about Gottlieb as well, a kind of palpable emotional force, especially around the eyes, that would be intimidating if his features were less expressive. He has the posture of a man who is confident about his current place in the universe.

But he doesn't look like me, and I am disappointed by that. For the past two weeks, I have been slightly obsessed with Gottlieb's new novel, Now You See Him, a book that has been tagged The Next Big Thing in serious literary circles. I do not participate directly in these circles (they make me gassy), but once in a while, I pop my head in to see what kind of intellectual smut the pornographers over at The New Yorker are doling out to the public. Those elitist buzzards wouldn't know an artistic achievement if it Pynchoned them on their Franzens.



However, in this case, the bastards got it right, and I'm forced to admit that there might actually be hope for artistic resonance after all. That is, if the anti-intellectual snobs on the other side of the coin are willing to loosen up the handcuffs and allow an original voice into their little Amazon.com club. We'll see.

My introduction to Gottlieb's book started when his publisher, William Morrow, sent me nine copies of it. Not two, not four — nine. This type of shock-and-awe promotional campaign is somewhat surprising when you consider the literary weight of the novel. (Morrow is trying to pigeonhole it as a "thriller," but don't you believe it — there's something far more interesting and morbid lurking in the shadows of Gottlieb's swaggering sentences than anything James Patterson ever cooked up.) It became sort of a joke around the office. Every time a package came in the mail, our editorial staff would gather around my desk like the children of Whoville on Christmas morning to watch me open it. Cheers were exchanged at the sight of yet another Now You See Him, and groans were bellowed if a timid publisher dared to waste our time with silly one-copy promotional efforts. I am not the type of person who believes in omens, but the literary gods seemed to be sending a message: you are supposed to read this book.

So I did, and I formed an unhealthy emotional attachment to the quirky, sardonic narrator, Nick Framingham, who walks the reader through the depraved corpse of postmodern American marriage, friendship and celebrity in Now You See Him. This happens fairly often with me. I become infatuated with protagonists in the same way teenage girls develop hysterical psycho-sexual bonds to the lead singers of boy bands. If I had a poster of Holden Caulfield, for instance, I would draw hearts on it and hang it in my school locker.

By the time my scheduled interview with Gottlieb rolled around, I had convinced myself that the author and I must be related — if not genetically, then in some sort of ethereal Shirley MacLaine kind of way. Somehow, he had wormed his way into my subconscious and siphoned off my dysfunctional personality to construct this awful, beautiful literary creature. Was I Framingham's doppelgänger, or was he mine? I wanted answers. And possibly royalties.

Comparing oneself to Nick Framingham does not exactly demonstrate a healthy self-image. He is, as Gottlieb says, an "unreliable narrator." His infuriating insistence on reliving absolutely every intimacy behind a thick veil of nostalgia has, over the years, transformed Framingham into a passive/aggressive train wreck. Emotionally, he is a cow, forever belching up memories from the past and chewing on them over, and over, and over...

It is, in fact, a minor literary miracle that Framingham is even likeable, much less, as becomes the case in the end, empathetic and ultimately heroic, in his own way. But that's exactly what happens, thanks to Gottlieb's meticulous work with character development.



In my search to uncover the metaphysical thread that connects my fate to Framingham's, I asked Gottlieb several times how he constructed this strange (anti)hero. Gottlieb was cagey about the whole affair: "Nick is not an autobiographical character, and therefore his creation is a bit of a mystery to me," he said. "I can't connect it to an easy schematic to explain how he arrived. Basically, how it works with me is that you keep piecing together characters until some kind of threshold is crossed and they are actually alive for you, as well as for the reader. You kind of assemble these Frankenstein machines out of spare parts and old memories, and then they take on their own life."

In short, Gottlieb is a Mad Scientist. He nurtures the voices in his head until they rise from the operating table, trash the laboratory and attack the villagers. He's a

character writer, and in an age where readers need a plot like junkies needs a fix, that's a rare thing. Now You See Him has a strong plot, but it's not the driving force of the book, and it's sort of laughable how all the critics keep talking about the novel as though it were a Die Hard movie. Nick Framingham is not John McClain, and this book is not a Grisham-wannabe. The plot takes you from point A to point B, but the destination is not nearly as important as the journey itself.

The book starts off with a murder-suicide that involves Framingham's childhood friend, Rob Castor, a literary cult figure of sorts. It is a shocking way to kick-start a story, and in a way, Gottlieb is telling us from the very beginning what the novel is about by removing the "suspense" from the narrative. The real intrigue comes from seeing how Gottlieb carries Framingham's internal crisis to a poetic and satisfying conclusion one forceful sentence at a time.

"I was just trying to be as true to the characters as I could," said Gottlieb. "I really am a character-driven writer. There's some narrative machinery in place, but I begin with character, so if you don't relate to the character, then you're not going to relate to the book."

Unfortunately, this basic precept is in danger of being lost amidst all the clucking about best-seller lists and movie rights. With the promotional blitzkrieg behind this book and the solid writing of Gottlieb, there's no doubt the novel will be a breakout success. However, it's quite possible that the average reader will miss the point. Forget the plot — it's just a vessel to carry Framingham across a sea of inner turmoil. What's important is where Framingham ends up and why. Gottlieb is attempting to recapture the artistic space left open by writers like Henry James, Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor and others who operated during a period in American literary history when the public had more patience for style and less of a fascination with blowing shit up.

There's nothing wrong with a plot-driven story, but focusing exclusively on any one aspect of art is a dangerous exercise. Every one of us has a self-destructive Framingham character inside us, and if we hold him at a distance, if we can't locate his true nature, we may never learn to live with him.

"There is a gap between our perceptions of ourselves and other's perceptions of us," Gottlieb explained when I asked him where Nick Framingham's self-delusion came from. "And occasionally the disjunction between how we think we're perceived and how we are in fact perceived is enormous in life.

On the Bill:

Eli Gottlieb will discuss Now You See Him at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 5, at the Boulder Book Store, 1107 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-447-2074.

Respond: letters@boulderweekly.com back to top





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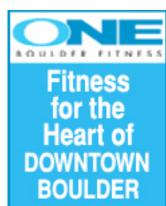
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